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SUBJECT: PARTY LEADERS AND POLITICAL ANALYSTS DISCUSS
DEMOCRACY IN AZERBAIJAN, N-K CONFLICT

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a November 7 dinner hosted by the Ambassador, a group of party leaders, Members of Parliament (MPs) and political analysts discussed the political situation in Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Leaders of the opposition parties shared their concerns about democracy in Azerbaijan, specifically the problems with freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. They said that the current GOAJ leadership lacks the political will to make the changes necessary to achieve democratic development. An MP from the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party said that the country is democratizing, and that there is freedom of speech in Azerbaijan. An independent MP said that Azerbaijan is not a democratic country, but is pursuing democracy, although there are problems with freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. He also said that it is the responsibility of the Azerbaijani people to build democracy in Azerbaijan. The political analysts noted that the GOAJ treats the opposition as an enemy, and that the government should understand it is in the country's best interest for the opposition to exist. The group had a lively exchange on N-K, with independent political analyst Arzu Abdullayeva urging the GOAJ to meet leaders of the "so-called Nagorno-Karabakh Republic." While ruling party MP Mubariz Gurbanli insisted that only Russia had the power to resolve the conflict, opposition leader Lala Shovket pledged that the opposition would support the GOAJ if it reached a fair resolution on the conflict. The discussion on N-K was exactly the sort of debate on the merits of a negotiated solution the Azerbaijan needs to undertake. END SUMMARY.

BILATERAL PRIORITIES

12. (C) On November 7, the Ambassador hosted a dinner with the leaders of several political parties, MPs and political analysts, as well as the Chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC). Guests included ruling-party MP Mubariz Gurbanli; opposition Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar; opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) Chair Ali Kerimli; opposition Azerbaijan Liberal Party (ALP) Chair Lala Shovket; head of the opposition Yeni Siyaset (YeS) bloc Eldar Namazov; independent Democratic Reforms Party (DRP) Chair and MP Asim Mollazade; political analysts Rasim Musabeyov, Leyla Alieva, and Arzu Abdullayeva; and CEC Chair Mazahir Panahov. The Ambassador outlined the three priorities in the bilateral relationship: energy, security, and democracy, and highlighted the five building blocks of democracy in which the USG is actively engaged diplomatically and programmatically: rule of law, a free and independent media, political process, an engaged, empowered, educated citizenry, and respect for human rights. She also said, to general agreement, that both political and economic reform are critical to Azerbaijan's democratic development. The Ambassador emphasized that "the best partners for the U.S.

are strong representative democracies that respect human rights."

THE OPPOSITION'S TAKE ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION

13. (C) Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar said that the GOAJ leadership does not possess the political will necessary for democratic development. He also emphasized that although President Bush waives Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act on an annual basis, the Azerbaijani population wants Section 907 off the books. Head of the YeS bloc, Eldar Namazov, said that most of the democratic steps the current GOAJ leadership have taken were under direct pressure from the international community. According to Namazov, the GOAJ is resistant to democratic development and lacks political will to make the necessary changes. ALP Chair Lala Shovket said that dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition is not possible because of the ruling party's hatred of the opposition, and that the GOAJ is intent on eliminating the opposition before the October 2008 Presidential Elections. According to Shovket, Azerbaijani law supports democratic principles, but these laws are for "export only," intended to appease the international community while not being implemented in practice. PFP Chair Ali Kerimli said that there has been backsliding rather than democratic development. He said that the only way for Azerbaijan to transition towards democracy is to recognize the problems that exist and to hold an open dialogue between the GOAJ and the opposition.

PRO-GOAJ AND INDEPENDENT VIEWS

14. (C) In stark contrast to the opposition leaders' statements, ruling party MP Mubariz Gurbanli said that

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Azerbaijan is making active progress towards democratic development. He said that "no country is satisfied with its opposition" and that the only unresolved problem in Azerbaijan is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. According to Gurbanli, there is freedom of speech in Azerbaijan and "everyone has the right to create an independent media outlet." Independent MP and Chair of DRP Asim Mollazade spoke up, saying "of course Azerbaijan is not a democratic country," but that with the help of countries like the U.S., Azerbaijan is pursuing democracy. According to Mollazade, in spite of Azerbaijan's successes, like the BTC pipeline, there are still problems with freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. He said that in order to achieve major democratic progress, Azerbaijan needs a "generation change," because Azerbaijan's youth have not been exposed to the Soviet system. Mollazade concluded, saying that "it is the task of Azerbaijanis to build our own democracy, but with the help of our democratic friends, like the U.S., it can happen much faster."

15. (C) Political analyst Arzu Abdullayeva said that in Azerbaijan, the GOAJ considers the opposition to be the enemy, and treats NGOs as if they are the opposition. According to Abdullayeva, current pressures on Azerbaijan's independent media pose a threat to democracy. Political analyst Leyla Alieva said that because of its status as an economic leader in the region, Azerbaijan has great reform potential. She also said that at the highest level of democracy, a government is tolerant of the opposition, and that the GOAJ should understand it is in the country's best interest for the opposition to exist. Ruling party MP Mubariz Gurbanli interrupted, saying that according to political science, if an opposition is unable to achieve its goals, it should "leave the political arena" and another opposition will arise.

N-K "BIGGEST PROBLEM"

¶6. (C) CEC Chair Mazahir Panahov said that the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is the biggest problem in the country and is "not politicized." ALP Chair Lala Shovket said that this is very painful to the Azerbaijani population and that all nations have the right to territorial integrity. She also said that a referendum on the future status of N-K would be favorable to the Armenian side. Political analyst Arzu Abdullayeva said that she had recently visited the occupied territories, and had discussed the Minsk Group core principles with a group of political analysts. According to Abdullayeva, ministerial level visits to the occupied territories from each side would help facilitate peace talks. Gurbanli said that Russia is the only party that has the power to solve the conflict, and if the GOAJ tried to negotiate with Armenia, the opposition would accuse it of being ready to concede Azerbaijani territory. Shovket responded strongly, underscoring that the opposition would support the GOAJ if it agreed to a fair resolution. Abdullayeva concluded that the N-K conflict is "heavy in the hearts" of the Azerbaijani people, and that the population would be able to accept a compromise.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The lively exchange on N-K among the participants in the dinner was a stunning change from the sloganeering and posturing with which this group of politicians usually addresses N-K. In our view, this is exactly the sort of debate - encompassing creative ideas and a measured analysis of the costs and benefits of a negotiated solution - that the Azerbaijani public must undertake. Abdullayeva is interested in fostering this debate, and hopes to pursue it through separate meetings with the government and leading opposition parties. We will meet her next week to further explore this idea.
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